

Georgia's Interstate System Plan (ISP)

Development of a strategic Interstate System Plan (ISP) for the state of Georgia continues since it began late last year. Sponsored by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), this exciting project will evaluate Georgia's Interstate System, identify necessary improvements, and produce a comprehensive and prioritized program of projects to meet increasing traffic demands and ensure future statewide mobility. The study, to be completed in the summer of 2004, is organized into three phases and focuses primarily on the interstates outside the Atlanta metro area. The first phase to gather needed data has recently concluded and the study's second (evaluation) phase is underway. The study's third phase, to develop a program of recommended projects, will proceed afterwards and signal the conclusion of work on this strategic study.

The critical need for completing this study is apparent. Nationally, the movement of consumer goods and freight is becoming increasingly important – especially if you consider that trucks carry 69 percent of the goods shipped in the U.S. and that 44 percent of all truck trips occur on the Interstates. As an extremely significant transportation engine for economic growth and regional connectivity in the State, Georgia's Interstate System represents only one percent of the 114,000 total miles of road in the State, yet carries 27 percent of the state's total traffic! Because Georgia is truly at the crossroads of the national Interstate System via many major interstate routes (I-20, I-59, I-75, I-85, I-95, I-185, I-520 & I-985) that pass through the State, this trend is understandable. Georgia's Interstate System facilitates access to ports on the eastern seaboard, Gulf Coast, and inland ports. Manufactured goods and agricultural products from Midwestern states are regularly shipped through Georgia on their way to ports and ultimately to Latin American and European markets. Tourists and business travelers traverse Georgia's Interstates to access the natural and manmade attractions in Georgia and surrounding states. Equally important is the critical support role of Georgia's Interstate System plays for military mobilization and transport, emergency evacuation, and the mobilization of emergency services throughout the southeastern United States. All of these activities serve to support and expand Georgia's economy.

Because of its pivotal role in the maintenance and growth of economic prosperity, long term planning for the Interstate System is critical to ensure that it can keep pace with increasing growth and demands. Providing improved safety and access to all areas of Georgia while enhancing local, regional, and international freight movement can only improve Georgia's economic vitality and the competitiveness of its international and regional ports.

The economic impact of a safe and efficient Interstate System is significant. Recent national, regional, and state studies reveal the positive economic importance that highways and transportation infrastructure investments can have for users and the economy. In Florida, one study showed that for every dollar invested to maintain the highway's condition, \$2.86 in user benefits (safety, time, and operating) result. A Maryland study found that highway investments accounted for almost 10 percent of the state's productivity growth between 1982 and 1996. In Georgia, several studies have shown that roadway improvements have direct economic impacts on the communities they serve, resulting in positive impacts on job creation, per capita income, retail sales and property values -- especially in rural areas.

Regardless of the industry, without an adequate transportation network that is conducive to importing materials, distributing products, and accessing a broad labor market, sustaining and expanding economic development can be impaired.

As work continues on Georgia's ISP to address these issues, one challenge has been to define and prioritize a set of infrastructure and technology investments that will support goals such as improving safety; enhancing freight and intermodal improvements; enhancing local, regional, and national economies; and maintaining the cultural and rural heritage of local communities. The study is proposing to achieve these goals by balancing major improvement projects in "hot spot" areas (where there are significant issues regarding congestion or access) with incremental and programmatic improvements that preserve and maintain the current system.

To date, the study's preliminary findings indicate that Georgia's Interstate System is in very good shape:

- 6.3 percent of the rural Interstate System and 3 percent of the urban Interstate System could benefit from specific safety improvements;
- only 0.4 percent of the 923-mile system evaluated in the study (non-Atlanta) is considered "congested";
- almost 90 percent of the pavement on Georgia's Interstate System is rated in "good" or "excellent" condition; and
- 99.4 percent of bridges on the state's Interstate System do not indicate a need for replacement at this time.

The system evaluation phase will continue to examine detailed current and future conditions in four core areas: safety, congestion, maintenance and connectivity. The connectivity evaluation, which is also underway, will identify opportunities to improve and upgrade connections between the Interstate System and major activity centers.

Next, the study will be identifying future deficiencies and compare them with projects already programmed in GDOT's Construction Work Program. Based on this comparison, potential solutions will be identified, field checks will occur, and all potential solutions will be tested using a transportation computer model as appropriate. The result will be a listing of study-recommended projects that demonstrate a measurable improvement to the safety, efficiency, and operation of Georgia's Interstate System.

Public involvement is vital to the development of a successful Interstate System Plan for Georgia. Comments from the public as well as the study's Stakeholder Advisory Group and Technical Committee are being incorporated as the study progresses. The next round of Stakeholder Advisory Group meetings will occur in late August/early September at three locations around the state, and public meetings will happen in September. Open house public meetings are scheduled in:

- **Cartersville** on Sept. 25th from 5-7PM at the GDOT District Office [500 Joe Frank Harris Parkway (US 41 south of Cartersville)];
- **Brunswick** on Sept. 30th from 5-7PM at the Coastal Georgia RDC [127 F St.];
- and **Macon** on Oct. 6th from 5-7PM at GDOT's Area Office [4499 Riverside Dr.].

All questions are welcomed by GDOT's project manager, Tom McQueen at thomas.mcqueen@dot.state.ga.us or (404)657-6697 or through Jeff Carroll of the consulting firm Day Wilburn Associates, Inc. at jcarroll@daywilburn.com or (404)249-7550. For additional project information, please visit the study's website at: www.dot.state.ga.us/dot/plan-prog/planning/studies/index.shtml.